

Marquette University

**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

College of Nursing Faculty Research and  
Publications

Nursing, College of

---

7-2012

## Transformative Learning Through Study Abroad in Low-Income Countries

Cynthia Foronda  
*University of Miami*

Ruth Belknap  
*Marquette University, [ruth.belknap@marquette.edu](mailto:ruth.belknap@marquette.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://epublications.marquette.edu/nursing\\_fac](https://epublications.marquette.edu/nursing_fac)



Part of the [Nursing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Foronda, Cynthia and Belknap, Ruth, "Transformative Learning Through Study Abroad in Low-Income Countries" (2012). *College of Nursing Faculty Research and Publications*. 151.  
[https://epublications.marquette.edu/nursing\\_fac/151](https://epublications.marquette.edu/nursing_fac/151)

Marquette University

**e-Publications@Marquette**

***Nursing Faculty Research and Publications/College of Nursing***

***This paper is NOT THE PUBLISHED VERSION; but the author's final, peer-reviewed manuscript. The published version may be accessed by following the link in the citation below.***

*Nurse Educator*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (July/August 2012): 157-161. [DOI](#). This article is © Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, Inc. and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, Inc. does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, Inc.

# Transformative Learning Through Study Abroad in Low-Income Countries

Cynthia Foronda

School of Nursing & Health Studies, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida

Ruth Ann Belknap

College of Nursing, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

## Abstract

Study abroad in low-income countries is an emerging trend in nursing education, yet student outcomes vary from positive to negative. Study abroad in low-income countries can be transformative because it has the potential to increase student awareness of socioeconomic relations, structural oppression, and human connectedness. The authors discuss 10 strategies to facilitate transformative learning in students who study abroad.

Americans recognize and value the importance of international education. According to a 2010 National Association of Foreign Student Advisers public opinion survey, "nearly three-fourths of respondents (73%) surveyed believe that America's higher-education institutions must do a better job of teaching students about the world if they are to be prepared to compete in the global economy."<sup>1(p2)</sup> Fifty-seven percent of those

surveyed agreed that study abroad is a vital component of an education that prepares them for success in the global workplace.”<sup>1(p3)</sup>

According to the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act of 2007, “Studies consistently show that United States’ students score below their counterparts in other advanced countries on indicators of international knowledge. This lack of global literacy is a national liability in an age of global trade and business, global interdependence, and global terror.”<sup>2(Sec. 2(4))</sup> The American Nurses Association Code of Ethics, Provision 8.1, recommends nurses collaborate with health professionals to address international health needs including, but not limited to, world hunger and lack of access to healthcare.<sup>3</sup> Nurse educators have an ethical and educational obligation to incorporate well-developed study-abroad opportunities into nursing curricula.

## Outcomes of Study Abroad

Evidence suggests study abroad cultivates cultural awareness and competence,<sup>4-7</sup> with several studies claiming that it results in students’ transformations.<sup>4,5,8-10</sup> These transformations were noted as life-changing experiences, indicating a major phenomenon in learning.

The negative outcomes of study abroad are documented less frequently. Educators may be hesitant to broadcast such events. Koskinen and Tossavainen<sup>6</sup> researched British nursing students who studied in Finland for 3 to 4 months. Some students expressed a cultural shock they were not able to overcome during their stay. The stress of language, culture, education, and housing inhibited students’ ability to participate and learn. “Students who lacked an ability to face the differences remained outsiders throughout their stay.”<sup>6(p373)</sup>

We studied the experience of nursing students who studied in Ecuador for 2 weeks.<sup>11</sup> Instead of experiencing a transformation, participants implemented a comparative mindset. Participants’ language choices provided evidence of emotional separation. Metaphors of animals were used to describe the Ecuadorians. Participants referred to the elderly as being “herded to the showers.”<sup>11(p81)</sup> Participants experienced an emotional journey comprised of fear, shock/surprise, frustration, and sympathy (as opposed to empathy). No participants demonstrated transformation or a desire to take social action in the future. Potential blocks to transformation were posited including egocentrism/emotional disconnect, perceived powerlessness/being overwhelmed, and a vacation mindset. Participants verbalized frustrations with peers rather than the conditions of poverty. Personal defense mechanisms of reaction formation and rationalization were found within the narratives.

## Theory of Transformative Learning

Mezirow<sup>12-17</sup> developed the theory of transformative learning, a constructivist-based theory of adult learning that meshes well with evaluating learning achieved from study abroad. Mezirow<sup>14</sup> presented 4 total processes or ways of learning: “by refining or elaborating our meaning schemes, learning new meaning schemes, transforming meaning schemes, and transforming meaning perspectives.”<sup>14(p224)</sup> The 4 processes of learning are illustrated with an example of an ethnocentric American student. If, after a study abroad experience, the student’s initial bias was only reinforced, the learning would demonstrate an elaboration of meaning schemes.<sup>15</sup>

The second process is different as it entails establishing a new point of view.<sup>15</sup> If the American student encountered a new group of individuals, focused on their shortcomings, and created new yet negative meaning schemes for them, the learning would be consistent with learning new meaning schemes.<sup>15</sup> The third process, transforming meaning schemes, involves transforming one’s point of view. If the American student who studied abroad reflected upon prior misconceptions about a group of individuals and changed his/her point of view, stating he/she no longer feels superior and is more accepting of their lifeways, transforming meaning schemes would be evident.<sup>15</sup>

The fourth process, transforming meaning perspectives or perspective transformation, entails a change in “habit of mind.”<sup>15</sup> This process is the most significant kind of learning. Perspective transformation arises as a cumulative effect or from a major event in one’s life. Perspective transformation is an “emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psychostructural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings.”<sup>12(p6)</sup>

In this process, the American student becomes aware of his/her generalized bias and changes his/her perspective regarding cultures other than his/her own. After studying abroad, the student realizes that humans are similar beings with equal human rights. He/she critically reflected upon his/her prior perspective, transformed his/her perspective, and incorporates this new thought process broadly across cultures. With his/her new frame of mind, he/she thinks about the inequities he/she witnessed and feels motivated to make changes. The final outcome in transformation theory is reflective action resulting in “learners motivated to take collective social action to change social practices, institutions, or systems.”<sup>14(p226)</sup>

## Ten Transformative Learning Strategies

As faculty, our goal is to facilitate the grandest learning: transformation. Contrary to common belief, we found immersion in a low-income country may not be enough to create a new way of thinking and may contribute to an even more entrenched stereotyping of the culture visited.<sup>11</sup> After implementing several study-abroad programs and researching student outcomes, we recommend the following overlapping strategies:

### Predeparture

#### Promote Instructor Commitment and Continuity

Just as in the traditional clinical settings in nursing, instructor familiarity with an area, the people, and the customs improves the educational experience. Becoming part of a study-abroad practicum is a large investment in many ways, taking years to become an expert in the field. Unfortunately, many instructors get “burned out” when they are saddled with the administrative work of a program. Leaving home at length and the stress associated with mentoring students in a low-income country take a good deal of energy. Support from the institution’s international exchange office is invaluable. Ideally, an instructor should make a minimum commitment to the study-abroad program for 3 to 5 years. This time frame allows the instructor to establish key relationships with members of the host country, become knowledgeable about the safe and unsafe areas, and optimally facilitate the planned activities.

#### Examine Course Objectives

Educational objectives must be carefully constructed. Objectives that encourage comparisons also encourage dualism and disconnection, often leading to a negative evaluation of the host country. In contrast, objectives that seek to find commonalities and identify community strengths may help students to view all people as members of the human family. Include objectives related to economics, the global market, epidemiology,<sup>18</sup> sustainability, or the philosophy of poverty as these topics are foundational in the health of populations. Course objectives must be clear and socially driven. Include an objective that generates ideas for social action. Objectives set the tone and plan of action for learning for the student and instructor (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Examples of Study Abroad Course Objectives

1. Describe international relations, economic influences, and global and legislative barriers influencing the host country.
2. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses related to health of a low-income community.
3. Explain the mindset and constraints of individuals living in poverty.
4. Identify with individuals living in poverty as members of the global community.

5. Develop a sustainable health promotion initiative for an identified community.
6. Propose a plan for social action within an underserved community.
7. Articulate lessons learned from the study abroad experience, and describe how these lessons might influence future life choices.

## Develop Evaluation Criteria Specific to Study Abroad in Nursing

Assessing student behavior while abroad is often a nebulous concept. Having concrete criteria and a rubric for evaluating behavior is helpful to grade students in a nontraditional setting. Rotabi et al<sup>19</sup> developed a model for building ethical engagement for social worker students who studied abroad. The 8 pillars or supports are (1) social justice and human rights, (2) community capacity, (3) dignity and worth of person, (4) self-determination, (5) boundaries, (6) competence, (7) facilitative learning, and (8) integrity.<sup>19</sup> Incorporating these pillars in framing course objectives, teaching methods and evaluation in nursing may foster a beneficial abroad experience. Five criteria were developed for evaluating behaviors of American social worker students who studied abroad.<sup>19</sup> These criteria were slightly modified, expounded upon, and incorporated into the example provided in Table 2. Implementation of these criteria may better prepare, engage, and proactively direct the behaviors of students.

**Table 2:** Evaluation Criteria for Performance in Study Abroad

### Cultural sensitivity

- Demonstrates respectful interactions with individuals of the host country
- Demonstrates awareness of when and when not to take photographs<sup>a</sup>
- Embraces local customs (as appropriate)
- Expresses appreciation of differing cultural beliefs and practices

### Communication

- Demonstrates knowledge of when to speak and when to listen<sup>a</sup>
- Freely attempts greetings and salutations<sup>a</sup>
- Engages appropriately with individuals of the host country
- Seeks an interpreter when needed<sup>a</sup>

### Flexibility

- Readily adapts to modifications of plans<sup>a</sup>
- Presents with an open mind when confronting areas of unfamiliarity or newness
- Willingly shares, helps, or sacrifices comfort or convenience for the sake of others

### Participation

- Participates appropriately in community activities
- Provides insightful contributions during debriefing sessions
- Demonstrates respectful actions and interactions with peers and instructors
- Exudes professionalism in activities
- Represents the United States in a positive light

<sup>a</sup>Ideas from the writings of Rotabi et al.<sup>19</sup>

## Have Thorough and Extensive Pretrip Efforts

Preparation efforts for a study abroad are lengthy, intense and can take years. Begin student preparation efforts minimally 6 months prior to the departure. Students must fully understand the purpose of the experience. Reviewing the course objectives, expectations of the student, planned clinical experiences, and hardships of the trip may help to remove the “vacation” expectation. Orientation sessions, having a former student who completed the course answer questions, are advantageous. Proactively address the components of the emotional journey of engaging in a low-income country. Prepare students for cultural customs such as tipping

for service, greeting, saying goodbye, accepting different food offerings, and bargaining practices. Students who understand how to act in a culturally sensitive manner will not only be more comfortable and learn more, but they also will more positively represent the United States.

## During the Immersion

### Foster Connection and Coping

An important first step is for the instructor to relate to the students as colleagues. Model ways to handle difficult feelings such as sadness, anger, and frustration. Create an environment of mutual trust. Demonstrate ways to relate to our global neighbors. Although complicated to arrange, having students stay a few nights in a home will foster deeper relationships with the host family and increase connection with them. Minimally, students should have an opportunity to make home or community visits with small groups, sharing food when possible.

Being in an unfamiliar social and physical environment requires coping strategies.<sup>20</sup> Our research indicated participants displayed an emotional disconnect and defense mechanisms to unconsciously protect themselves from experiencing the deep sadness of seeing individuals in poverty.<sup>11</sup> To enhance coping, prepare students for difficult situations and discuss healthy coping mechanisms such as journaling or debriefing with peers and professor. Faculty should have experience with debriefing techniques incorporating mental health principles. Cultures in low-income countries have different paces and priorities than those that predominate in the United States. Itineraries filled to the maximum are counterproductive and overwhelming. While abroad, students may need time alone, time to take a walk, and time to cry or have a peer or instructor available for support. Instructors also need times for these activities.

The amount and type of leisure activities incorporated into the agenda should be considered carefully. The focus of leisure activities should be one of cultural connection, for example, taking part in activities that are customary for the region. Unstructured time must be included in the schedule, separate from leisure activities to allow students to destress. Model flexibility as values of time is culturally dependant, and unforeseen conditions may lead to changes in the itinerary. Debriefing sessions are essential, daily when possible, and always following experiences students have found troubling.

### Use Select and Various Teaching Methods

Implement select teaching strategies to address diversity and engage learners. Examples of effective educational methods include case studies, role play, learning contracts, group projects, concept mapping, consciousness raising, and participation in social action.<sup>17</sup> Creating problem-solving and contingency groups and developing “interventions facilitated by the instructor to resolve crises and evaluate new opportunities” help promote learning.<sup>19(p459)</sup> Learning contracts subscribe nicely to adult learning theory and may increase student motivation and commitment. Creative educational strategies are likely to leave a lasting change in student perceptions regarding the study experience.

Mezirow<sup>15</sup> emphasized the importance of discourse to validate what one understands and encouraged a social process in making meaning. Scheduling group reflection and debriefing sessions assists students to be aware of their own perspectives and others’ perspectives. Presenting scenarios, causing students to imagine themselves in poverty and explore those situations, may assist students to emotionally connect. Making poverty feel personal for students, instead of something outside their experience, is essential. A debriefing session could start with a student presenting a distressing situation witnessed that day, followed by questions such as “If you were in his/her shoes what do you think you would be feeling?” or “What do you think you would do if you were in that situation?” Pose additional questions to prompt leadership in future social action. For example, ask the student, “What has been our part, as members of a consumer society, in creating this situation?” “What would it

take to help change conditions for people here?” “What can you personally control in your actions to positively impact the global society?”

### Encourage Small Steps

Encouraging small steps to initiate change may be useful. Encourage the philosophy that every little bit helps. Posing questions and ideas addressing small endeavors may inspire future planning. Example questions are “What might you do differently in your work as a nurse after viewing healthcare conditions here?” “What might you do differently every day in your home after learning from this experience?” “How could you help one family in a low-income country once you return home?” Encourage thoughts of being the influential factor in making change. Discuss with students the power of collaboration.

### Include Course Content Related to the Environment, Conservation, and Creativity

When residing in a low-income country, discuss with students what is happening in the environment. Talk about precious natural resources and explore what threatens them using examples specific to the region. Guest speakers or visits to organizations engaged in protecting the environment are helpful. Observe the host country’s use of consumer goods. Point out the conservation, ingenuity, and creativity witnessed in nursing practice as well as general living. Discuss how students can modify their life habits to decrease wasting and promote conservation when they return home.

### Raise Awareness of Oppressive Systems

To raise awareness of oppressive global structures of production and work, Lange<sup>21</sup> recommends performing a socioeconomic analysis of North American consumption habits and the global impact on other people and the environment.<sup>21</sup> She suggests students examine their consumption levels and convert them into an ecological footprint. “Trace the life cycle of one consumer product, such as a pair of jeans, T-shirt, tomato, or banana, which quickly makes these global interconnections apparent and unveils the global structures of production and work: who benefits, who does not, and why.”<sup>21(p199)</sup> Assigning biographies of people in migration due to economic pressures in their home country helps to put a human face on those disadvantaged by these global structures of production and work. Discuss legislative barriers and problem solve on how to overcome these barriers. At the conclusion of course work and international experience, posing the following question by Lange makes an excellent written or oral reflection activity: “How could I transform my working and living to be nonharming and, more important, life giving?”<sup>21(p199)</sup>

### Shift to a Service-Learning Approach

Educators may be inadvertently contributing to students’ egocentrism when using a student-centered approach. Shifting to a service-learning approach with the focus of study abroad on the community’s strengths and needs puts a focus on learning from the people. Focusing on community strengths creates opportunities for students to explore and learn from the community. Implement projects with the community, based on community wants and needs and student expertise. Incorporating sustainable efforts through education are often appreciated when properly focused. Embracing a service-learning approach helps students to view the community connection as their primary goal and ultimately increase learning.

### Conclusion

Study abroad in low-income countries is an emerging and needed trend in nursing education. These experiences have the opportunity to bridge students to the global community or to separate them. Instructors play a critical role in facilitation of human connections and a truly transformative outcome. The fact that some in academe feel study abroad is a vacation and waste of financial resources only supports the glaring misunderstanding and knowledge gap. A well-run study-abroad program is an arduous and stressful process, but the potential

outcomes of improved international relations, international knowledge, and transforming students to become change agents in social action are worth the effort and advocacy.

## Acknowledgment

The authors thank Sandra Stearns, Dean of Nursing, at Waukesha County Technical College for her support in study-abroad opportunities for nursing students and faculty. The authors express appreciation to Community Colleges for International Development for their role and efforts to increase study abroad.

## REFERENCES

1. NAFSA. Association of International Educators. *Educating Students for Success in the Global Economy. A Public Opinion Survey on the Importance of International Education*. Updated 2011. Available at <http://www.nafsa.org/publicpolicy/default.aspx?id=23955>. Accessed December 28, 2011.
2. *Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act of 2007*. The Library of Congress. Available at <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c110:S.991>. Accessed December 28, 2011.
3. American Nurses Association. *Code of Ethics for Nurses With Interpretive Statements*. Washington, DC: American Nurses Publishing; 2001.
4. Evanson TA, Zust BL. "Bittersweet knowledge": the long-term effects of an international experience. *J Nurs Educ*. 2006; 45 (10): 412–419.
5. Genz S. *Developing Cultural Competence in Undergraduate Nursing Students Through Short-term Immersion Programs* [unpublished PhD dissertation]. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota; 2007.
6. Koskinen L, Tossavainen K. Intercultural nursing. Benefits/problems of enhancing students' intercultural competence. *Br J Nurs*. 2003; 12 (6): 369–377.
7. Lee RL, Pang SM, Wong T, Chan MF. Evaluation of an innovative nursing exchange programme: health counselling skills and cultural awareness. *Nurse Educ Today*. 2007; 27: 868–877.
8. Levine M. Transforming experiences: nursing education and international immersion programs. *J Prof Nurs*. 2009; 25 (3): 156–169.
9. Reimer Kirkham S, Van Hofwegen L, Pankratz D. Keeping the vision: sustaining social consciousness with nursing students following international learning experiences. *Int J Nurs Scholarsh*. 2009; 6 (1), article 3: 1–16.
10. Ruddock HC, Turner DS. Developing cultural sensitivity: nursing students' experiences of a study abroad programme. *J Adv Nurs*. 2007; 59 (4): 361–369.
11. Foronda C. *Associate Degree Nursing Students' Thoughts, Feelings, and Experiences of Short Study Abroad in a Low-Income Country* [PhD dissertation]. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University; 2010.
12. Mezirow J. A critical theory of adult learning and education. *Adult Educ Q*. 1981; 32 (1): 3–24.
13. Mezirow J. *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 1991.
14. Mezirow J. Understanding transformation theory. *Adult Educ Q*. 1994; 44 (4): 222–232.
15. Mezirow J. Transformative learning: theory to practice. *New Dir Adult Contin Educ*. 1997; 74: 5–12.
16. Mezirow JE. W. Taylor & Associates. *Transformative Learning in Practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2009.
17. Mezirow J& Associates. *Learning as Transformation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2000.
18. Saenz K, Holcomb L. Essential tools for a study abroad nursing course. *Nurse Educ*. 2009; 34 (4): 172–175.
19. Rotabi KS, Gammonley D, Gamble DN. Ethical guidelines for study abroad: can we transform ugly Americans into engaged global citizens? *Br J Soc Work*. 2006; 36: 451–465.
20. Weigerink-Roe E, Rucker-Shannon M. Immersion in China: lessons learned. *Nurse Educ*. 2008; 33 (2): 71–74.



21. Lange EA. Fostering a learning sanctuary for transformation in sustainability education. In: Mezirow J, Taylor EW& Associates, eds. *Transformative Learning in Practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2009: 193–204.